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The System: Saved by Bits of Tape

"The other, less-reassuring lesson of Watergate: The system may work, but it sometimes needs a lot of help and a lot of luck."

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Mr. Nixon finally was driven to confess at least a little of what we knew all along. The inexorable pressure of the processes that were under way proved, at last, irresistible, and he yielded.

And some of us, relieved and vindicated, are saying that this is further proof that the system works. Our Constitution proved reliable enough, our justice blind enough, our institutions independent enough and our civil servants honorable enough to see to it that not even a President of the United States could remain above and beyond the law.

The system works: That is the lesson of Watergate. The system works.

Well, there is another, less-reassuring lesson of Watergate: The system may work, but it sometimes needs a lot of help and a lot of luck.

The thing that keeps haunting me is how much the vindication of the system is the result of two freak accidents: Frank Wills' discovery of the Watergate burglars and the President's decision to bug his own office. Without those two things, we would not have this week's denounement. I shudder to think *what* we might have had by now.

Frank Wills will remain a hero in this historic episode, but he needed help. If the burglars had been bright enough not to retape the lock of the Democratic National Committee's Watergate office, after Wills had removed the first piece of tape, would Wills have called the police? And if he hadn't, would we be congratulating ourselves on how well the system works?

If that stupid—and so far as we know, fruitless—burglary had gone undiscovered, we would never have known about the White House enemies list, the laundering of truckloads of campaign cash, the illegally operating "plumbers" unit, the "dirty tricks" against major political opponents, the cynical use of the President's loyal supporters, the use of government agencies for private political vendettas —in short, the subversion of both the political and the governmental processes.

We most likely would not have known even of the President's all-but-successful efforts to enrich himself through illegal income tax deductions. The civil servant who leaked Mr. Nixon's tax returns apparently did so because he saw the payment of only token income taxes as part of a pattern of questionable leadership, not because he suspected the returns were specifically fraudulent.

If that third-rate burglary hadn't been discovered, would it have occurred to that patriot at the Internal Revenue Service to let us know that we had a third-rate President?

But even Frank Wills and the IRS patriot couldn't have saved us from Richard Nixon without some major help—from Richard Nixon. The investigation of the burglary would have led us to some unpleasant facts, and would have raised some still more unpleasant suspicions about the national administration, but there would not have been the evidence upon which to base definitive action.

The President himself gathered the evidence with his good old Sony, and he preserved it (or a lot of it, at any rate) for posterity for reasons best known to Richard Nixon. If he hadn't tape recorded himself and his fellow conspirators, or if he had taken the tapes to the furnace room as soon as their existence became public knowledge, we would have suspected much but known very little, and Mr. Nixon would still be firmly in charge of the government.

And what a government it might have been by now. No reasonable person can believe that the dirt, the lying, the subversion, the amassing of staggering amounts of unrecorded cash were done out of fear that George McGovern would win the presidential election. The pattern of operation—of which we still have seen only glimpses —suggests not so much a tactic for winning an office but a strategy for keeping it, perhaps indefinitely.

That isn't as farfetched as it may sound. And I have no trouble whatever imagining a Lou Harris poll showing 35 per cent of the people for, 33 per cent of the people against and 32 per cent of the people with no opinion on Mr. Nixon's emergency seizure of the government. For reasons of national security, of course.

Some observers may be reassured that the system works. This one is a little frightened at the evidence that the only thing that held the system together was tape: a little bit of adhesive tape on the Watergate door and miles of magnetic tape on the White House recorder—and both of them there by a fluke.

And now that the game is up, now after the wrenching ordeal of the impeachment hearings and the agony of constitutional crisis—now that we have caught the thief making off with our government and have obtained his confession, it being no longer possible to maintain the lie—now there are those who want to pass a bill granting him amnesty.

A bill of immunity in exchange for resignation might have made sense back when resignation would have saved the nation a season of grief.

But now that the grief is mostly behind us, what conceivable ground is there for a grant of amnesty? I suppose you could treat him as a first offender. So far as I know, this is the first time he ever tried to steal a country.